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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 002251

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KMPI](#) [KISL](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS DERAILED QUICK APPROVAL OF  
DRAFT LAW

REF: A. AMMAN 1924

[B](#). AMMAN 1719

[C](#). AMMAN 1353

Classified By: CDA Christopher Henzel for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#). (C) Leaders of Jordan's professional associations launched a full-court press against draft government legislation designed to wrest control of the unions (and their funds) from an Islamist minority out of step with rank and file members. Peaceful demonstrations were held across the country attacking the proposed law as a government attempt to control the associations and a violation of public liberties. The GOJ countered that the legislation would restore the associations' proper role of serving the professional needs of members and ensure a more representative leadership. The associations' campaign succeeded in delaying quick action on the law in parliament as MPs shied away from controversy and referred the bill to committee for further study. End Summary.

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A NEW LAW  
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[2](#). (U) New draft legislation introduced in parliament by the GOJ to reform the country's professional associations (ref A) came under swift and forceful attack from opposition forces. In its current form, the bill would change the way the unions' leadership is chosen by creating "intermediary councils" elected by members of local association branches throughout Jordan under a "one person, one vote" formula; these council would in turn elect the president and councils of the national associations. (NOTE: The leadership is currently elected by a national general assembly using a "list" system of candidates largely controlled by the Islamists. A majority of the associations' 140,000 members do not participate in this process due to apathy and/or antipathy toward the mandatory unions. END NOTE.) The draft law also authorizes the government Audit Bureau to inspect the associations' financial records and restricts association activities to internal and professional (i.e., non-political) matters.

[3](#). (C) The government concedes that the law was drafted in part to wrest control of the associations away from a non-representative Islamist minority who have misused the unions (and their considerable funds) (ref A). In public statements the GOJ maintains that the legislation will also expand the scope of participation and decision-making in the associations, better serve members' professional needs, and enhance transparency of spent funds.

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GOING ALL OUT  
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[4](#). (U) The associations' leaders paint a much different picture of the draft law. Realizing that their control of the associations -- and the accompanying dues -- is directly threatened by the legislation, they launched a vigorous campaign to defeat its passage in parliament. The Professional Associations Council (PAC) took out large advertisements in several Arabic dailies condemning the bill "which seeks to dismantle the unions and place them under government control." Other ads were directed towards MPs in the Lower House urging them to reject the draft law because it "contradicts the country's push for public reforms and greater democracy." Several prominent editorials in the local press either criticized the bill for being "undemocratic" or questioned why it had been drafted in such haste and without broad consultations.

[5](#). (U) On March 12, the associations and the Higher Coordination Committee of opposition political parties (dominated by the Islamic Action Front) staged peaceful demonstrations against the proposed law in cities throughout Jordan, including Irbid, Ajloun, Karak, and Zarqa. Another

protest sponsored by opposition parties (and which had been approved by the governor of Amman as stipulated by the Public Assembly Law) took place in front of the parliament building March 13. Several hundred participants, some carrying placards with anti-government slogans, called on MPs to vote against the bill.

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POLITICAL MANEUVERING  
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16. (U) Debate within parliament on March 13 was heated. Over 30 MPs criticized the government for introducing the legislation, claiming that it went against "the people's democratic aspirations" and the King's directives." Former two-time minister and vocal GOJ critic Abdul Karim Dughmi (East Banker, Mafrag) stated, "A government that suggests such a law is a government of political failure, not a government of political development." Independent MP and former Minister of Health Abdul Rahim Malhas (East Banker, Amman) charged that "the government wants all people to think alike." Proponents of the law responded that a change was sorely needed to force the associations to stop ignoring the professional needs of their members. In his address to MPs, Prime Minister al-Fayez said that while Jordanians were "proud" of the associations and that the unions represented a "cornerstone" of civil society, he claimed that they had "used their position as a podium to attack Jordan's principled stands." A majority of the 101 MPs voted at day's end against giving the proposed legislation "urgency status" as requested by the GOJ (i.e., against placing it on the fast track for a final vote of approval/rejection) and instead referred it to the Legal Committee for review.

17. (C) The vote in the Lower House came after intense behind-the-scenes maneuvering by opposition forces. According to parliamentary contacts, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) and its allies approached every major bloc in the Lower House and promised to discontinue the associations' anti-government rhetoric and political activity if MPs rejected the proposed law. MP Abdullah al-Jazi (East Banker, Southern Badia), deputy head of the pro-government National Parliamentary Action bloc, told poloff March 8 that he and his colleagues had rebuffed the offer. "Why should we agree? They brought this upon themselves." Al-Jazi at the time was confident that the law would eventually pass the Lower House, pointing out that 60 MPs had earlier signed a letter requesting the GOJ to draft legislation reforming the professional associations.

18. (C) While the associations' backers failed to persuade a majority of MPs to reject the bill outright, their campaign nevertheless succeeded in derailing the GOJ's hopes that it would be approved prior to the adjournment of the current parliamentary session on March 30. Several MPs reported that while they supported the law, the intense criticism against it had prompted them to refer it to committee, rather than take a definitive stand for it. MP Suleiman Abu Ghaith (West Banker, Madaba) told poloff March 15 that he and many of his colleagues hoped the law could still be salvaged during the next session if the Legal Committee proposed amendments that would make the bill more palatable while preserving its overall purpose.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) The GOJ was apparently unprepared for the intense campaign (and resulting outcry) against its attempt to reform the professional associations. Despite a non-representative leadership structure and agenda, the Islamist union heads were able to portray the associations as "democratic" institutions and enlist the support of non-Islamist government critics (e.g., Dughmi). In contrast to the associations' concerted efforts -- both in public and behind closed doors -- to rally support for their position, the Jordanian government did little to promote its draft law other than the usual appeal to pro-government MPs in the Lower House. The GOJ will have to do a better job in countering the associations' arguments if the bill is not to languish in committee.

10. (U) Minimize considered.  
HENZEL